



**Observations on the work  
of the Office of Technical Co-operation  
of the United Nations  
in Burma**

*REPORT*

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*Joint Inspection Unit*

**Geneva  
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1. I spent the month of November 1970 in Burma on a visit of inspection covering all activities in that country of those organizations, members of the United Nations family, which come within the purview of the Joint Inspection Unit. The present report is limited to the work in Burma of the UN Office of Technical Co-operation. My purpose is not to describe the projects which I have seen in action, but rather to raise one or two points on which I think comment might be interesting and perhaps even useful.

#### GENERAL

##### The position of Technical Assistance experts

2. It seems that, in a reasonably near future, the distinction and the water-tight doors between the Technical Assistance and the Special Fund sectors of the United Nations Development Programme will be swept away. When that time comes, identical or at least similar terms and regulations will presumably apply to all project staff in the field, however large or small the scale of the individual operation concerned. For the present, however, the distinction is still with us, and this distinction seems to matter more - from a practical point of view - in Burma than in most of the other countries which I have visited on inspection during the last three years.

3. The normal purpose of a pre-investment project - the preparation of a "bankable" report - does not exactly fit circumstances in Burma, where the declared aim of the Government is not so much to interest foreign capital and foreign contractors as to undertake suggested development works with national resources of capital, expertise and labour as and when these can be accumulated and trained. Pending such time, the United Nations is called upon to fill the gap. In Burma, therefore, UN project staff are frequently required to produce not a pre-investment study but a detailed construction design for eventual execution by the Burmese themselves. A Special Fund team so engaged is in a very different position from that of a construction engineer working to his own detailed drawings, carrying his professional responsibility to the point of execution and enjoying the possibility of introducing into his plans, as he goes along, modifications which may be revealed as necessary only during the actual course of construction. This an absentee designer cannot do. These disadvantages are compounded in the TA sector, which hitherto has been preponderant in Burma (although this situation is beginning to change). In this sector, instead of a more or less homogeneous SF team, one finds a collection of

individual TA experts loosely knit under a "team leader". The SF team has a specific target to hit, formally agreed with the Government, whose part in the co-operative effort is clearly set out in writing. By comparison, the TA expert is adrift. Historically, the designation TA implies an advisory rather than an executive capacity and this, when there is a job of work to be done for which, inevitably, the expatriate expert must carry professional responsibility, engenders a feeling of unease which I found quite general in Burma. The TA expert, often a man with many years of executive achievement behind him, finds himself advising and training in an organization in which he exercises no authority - in a machine which, although he is highly capable of doing so, he is not licensed to drive.

4. I see no easy way out of this situation for those projects now working on a TA basis but with aims more reminiscent of those of the Special Fund. In a later comment on project UN/BUR/68/2 I make a suggestion which might possibly be helpful in other cases also, but I place more hope in the undoubted movement in Burma, at which I have already hinted, towards a greater proportion of SF rather than TA projects. For the future it is to be hoped that with the disappearance of the distinction between TA and SF sectors small projects will enjoy the benefit of specific plans of operations, working to which will be more effective and more satisfying to the individual expert or small team than floating within the fluid framework of a less precise mandate.

#### Lack of Co-ordination

5. Failure to co-ordinate UN effort in Burma emerges particularly in the field of development of water resources. Here I found four separate organizations engaged, a fifth - the Mu River Irrigation Survey - having recently been wound up. The four in progress were:- the Three Reservoirs Project, under the National Housing Board; the Designing and Construction of Hydro-electric projects, under the Electricity Supply Board; the Sittang Valley Development Project and the FAO project on the extension of certain Irrigation Schemes, both of which last two projects operate under the Irrigation Department. It will be objected that these projects have different aims - drinking water, irrigation, power - but the fact remains that they are all dealing essentially with soil, dams and water and that, by and large, each has its own geologist, hydrologist, dam designer, designer of hydraulic structures etc., etc. Even within each separate project there is concealed unemployment, with one

specialist unable to get on with his own task until that of another, on which his own must be based, is finished. It would have taken much more time than I had to establish a complete picture of the situation, but I heard similar stories from so many of those concerned that I am satisfied that much valuable time and skill is now being wasted. I understand that this situation has not passed unnoticed at Headquarters, but that an earlier attempt to achieve better co-ordination proved unsuccessful and had to be abandoned. The matter is however of great importance and I trust that further efforts will be made to eliminate the present waste of resources.

6. One possible remedy might be gradually to merge the existing UN projects which I have listed or - should this prove too complicated - future projects requested by the Government of Burma in these fields into one central Land and Water Development Office in Rangoon. An organization of this kind, backed from time to time as might prove necessary by visits by specialized consultants or by advice from Headquarters, would surely be more economical and efficient than the present multiplicity of overlapping and often underemployed skills. The project manager and Burmese counterpart in charge of such an office might occasionally be faced by awkward problems of priorities arising from requests for urgent work on different projects in simultaneous execution, but since the task of the office would be essentially the provision of top-level advice and since the bulk of the field work, as I see it, would be performed by the technical staff of the various Ministries and Departments concerned, this difficulty should not be insuperable. Should such an organization prove feasible, I should like to stress that it should be a multi-disciplinary enterprise embracing the interests (as reflected in the present position) of FAO as well as OTC. The eventual introduction into Burma of Country Planning for UN technical co-operation might provide a good opportunity for serious consideration of the desirability of rationalization along these or similar lines.

#### INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS

Preparation of Designs and Drawings for the Three Reservoirs Project for Water Supply. Project symbol UN/BUR/68/2.

7. The aim of this project is the improvement of the supply of drinking water to Rangoon, Moulmein and Akyab. Work is proceeding on all three schemes, but priority is being given to Rangoon, where the urgency is greatest. UN technical

co-operation with the project suffered in the first place from falling between the two stools of Technical Assistance and Special Fund. It now consists of the services of three specialists whose duties are to assist and advise on the preparation of design and construction drawings for the three schemes, to prepare cost estimates and specifications and to train local engineers. Since the National Housing Board, under which the scheme falls, has no section dealing specifically with problems of drinking water, the team of designers with which the UN experts work is composed of engineers drawn from other branches of the Government services.

8. I visited the new project offices and was told that these were a great improvement on the previous premises. I was however disappointed to see that the three UN specialists were separated from the office of the Burmese director of the project by the whole length of the drawing floor. In my view this cannot but add to the feeling to which I have referred in my general remarks that the UN staff is with the project but not in it, and I should have thought it far more conducive to a proper spirit of co-operation if the Burmese direction and the UN advice were to be grouped together rather than set apart. Nor would the advantage of such rearrangement be purely psychological. I sense that there is at the moment a lack of purpose and urgency about the operation. There is, for example, no time-table of work - no date lines prescribing when various stages of the task must be started and completed. This is unsettling for those who have been used to working to definite schedules, but it must also reflect on the tone of the whole undertaking. And the reason for there being no timed programme of work appears quite simply to be uncertainty who should produce such a programme - the Burmese director or the UN team leader. Lack of firm direction appears to me to be reducing the potential efficiency of this project and I would like to suggest - subject of course to the agreement of all concerned, including not only Burmese officials but also the Resident Representative of the Administrator of the UNDP - that it might be possible to put more punch into this project by setting up an action committee which should gather together the authority of the Burmese director and the knowledge and practical experience of the UN specialists. I do not suggest any alteration of the existing lines of command, but merely a closer merging of existing elements which, I believe, would generate more dynamism in this operation than now exists and provide that truly effective management that has not yet been achieved.

Engineer (Design of Hydro-electric Projects). Project symbol UN/BUR/68/5.

9. The second UN engineer to serve in this position had been in Rangoon for only three weeks when I met him. His terms of reference under the Hydro-electric Department of the Electricity Supply Board of the Ministry of Industry include the following points:- To analyse available data and existing reports; recommend further studies and assist in planning them; assist and advise on engineering and economic appraisal of hydro-electric projects and suggest priorities among them; to assist and advise on the planning of selected hydro-electric projects and designs for dams, power stations etc.; assist and advise on construction drawings for Balu Chaung, Stage II; train Burmese engineers.

10. Apart from a glance back at my general observations on the position of TA specialists in Burma, the only point I would wish to raise in connexion with this operation is one of overlapping responsibilities. As will be seen from the above extract from his job description, the expert's responsibilities in hydro-electric development extend to the whole area of Burma covered by the Electricity Supply Board. Since the supply of electricity to the fast growing capital, Rangoon, enjoys high priority, the Board is particularly interested in pressing on with the study of the three possible sites for the generation of hydro-electric power in the relatively adjacent Sittang river basin, as adumbrated in the UN Sittang Report of 1964 - Thaukyegat, Paunglaung and Bawgata. With such development in mind, the Board has asked the UN expert to prepare job descriptions for posts in geology and hydrology which the Board intends to seek from the UN. My earlier general remarks on co-ordination are relevant here, but the chief point I wish to make is that these three sites occupy a large area of the field in which the Sittang Valley Development Project has been commissioned to produce a general feasibility study, under the aegis, it is true, of the Irrigation Department and not of the E.S.B., but with a clear mandate to examine the overall economic development potential of the area as a whole. If the Burmese Government has already decided to give over-riding priority to power production in these three sectors, the manager of the Sittang project should be so instructed, so that he can provide accordingly in his overall study. It would be ridiculous to see separate UN teams, under the same executing agency but different national authorities, working at cross purposes on identical sites.

Mu River Irrigation Survey. Project Symbol BUR 5.

11. This Special Fund project was technically completed by the time of my visit to Burma, but it was still raising eddies which attracted my attention. In particular, the Burmese Government was not satisfied that the sub-contractors in their final report had rather brushed away as being technically unprofitable the possibility of the generation of hydro-electric power at one particular site on which the Government particularly wished for a detailed study. The third aim of the comprehensive feasibility study called for in the plan of operations specifically refers to "the production and distribution of hydro-electric power". I understand that a meeting is to be arranged at which the parties concerned will discuss how to fill this lacuna in the report, but my main interest is to consider how an aspect of the planned operations so clearly set out could have slipped out of the picture for so long a period without being noticed before the draft of the final report was in the Government's hands. There are many stages at which and many authorities by whom such an omission could and should have been noticed. I shall be content with making a formal recommendation that every possible care be taken in future to ensure, by periodical checks, that the main directives of the plan of operations of a project are being, in the main, followed, or that, if there is material deviation, it should be with the agreement of the parties involved.

12. The Mu project raises once again the question what is the more appropriate duty station for the UN project manager of a sub-contracted project - at the capital for better liaison with the Ministry concerned or at the project site for better control of operations. I have seen examples of both and it appears that each separate case must be very carefully considered on its own merits. In any case, I would think it wrong that so important a question should be decided on financial grounds connected with the payment of per diem subsistence allowance. Where it is reasonable and in the interest of the work to be performed that a project manager should divide his time more or less evenly between two stations, I would suggest that there is a good prima facie case for careful examination of the desirability of making an exception to established rules and setting up special, appropriate financial arrangements. Subsistence allowances designed primarily to meet the needs of peripatetic officers are not necessarily always appropriate to the circumstances of commuting project managers.



13. Finally, in connexion with the tale of the Mu project, I would like to suggest that certain of its tribulations could have been curtailed and assuaged by earlier recourse to the services of the Resident Representative. Resident Representatives are almost by definition among the busiest men in the world, but it usually costs far less time to get things back on the right track than to clear up the consequences of continued movement on the wrong lines.

Development of the Sittang River Valley. Project symbol BUR 13.

(UN OTC in association with FAO)

14. This project, which has been officially operational since October 1969, comprises a general feasibility study of the Sittang Basin, to be carried out by the SF team, and more advanced studies in two selected areas, in which the SF team will be augmented by sub-contracted engineering services. Aerial photography and mapping required will also be procured by sub-contract. Serious delays have occurred in getting project staff into position, delivery of project equipment has been slow, all delays have of course been compounded by the five months of tropical rain associated with the South-West monsoon and, all in all, it is perhaps as well that the engineering sub-contract has also been held back. (At least nothing is known in Rangoon of the progress of the contract negotiations). The latest suggested date for the start of the contract is 1 February 1971. Even this date, if met, would give only four months before the onset of the next monsoon. Looking back at the original operations chart, I cannot help thinking that the plan was more than somewhat unrealistic. In retrospect at least, it seems impossible to believe that anyone imagined that the key specialists for the start of the operation could have been put into the field three months after signature of the plan of operations, let alone that on this same date all the necessary spade work could have been completed to allow the sub-contractor to start work. Nor does account appear to have been taken of experience which shows that an average delay of up to nine months in the delivery of equipment is by no means unusual in projects of this kind. I strongly recommend the use of simple network analysis techniques for planning the execution of projects, combined with much realistic imagination of what is likely or indeed certain to happen at the other end of the line.

15. The story of the delays incurred in the delivery of project equipment makes sad reading. A requisition for eight Landrovers took thirteen and a half months to mature. Drilling equipment ordered at the end of December 1969 was still

awaited when I left Burma at the end of November 1970. It took eight months to get drawing pencils - sine qua non of a drawing office and unobtainable locally. Four dozen coloured pencils - more exotic perhaps, but still necessary - not received after over ten months. City tyres received for working vehicles in spite of clear specification of cross-country tyres. Frequent failure to send copies of payment vouchers, with the result that the project manager cannot keep his ledgers up to date or know, in a world of rising prices, where his project stands financially. But I do not wish to multiply examples. Suffice it to say that there is ample evidence of administrative muddle. It seems unlikely that any commercial firm could long survive such inefficiency in its supply department and I cannot see how UN technical co-operation can prosper until proven individual instances of bad, slow, careless work are traced to their perpetrators and exemplary action taken. It is useless to work out detailed plans for the re-organization of the UN family's machinery for technical co-operation if the cutting edge in the field continues to be swathed and muffled in red tape and inefficiency.

16. A decision has been taken in New York not to take advantage of the services offered by the UNICEF organization for the maintenance and repair of the project's transport vehicles. After having seen something of the workings of this organization, I believe this decision to have been wrong and would plead for reconsideration. Set up in 1958, the Fund's vehicle maintenance organization in Burma now regularly services - and repairs, as required - some 450 vehicles supplied by the Fund to various Government Departments for service all over Burma. It holds a wide range of some 4,000 items of spare parts and its store room and record cards speak of an efficiently run operation. It also handles such formalities as insurance, registration and tax. The fact that vehicle maintenance is a counterpart obligation of the Irrigation Department appears to me to be no obstacle, since UNICEF is well accustomed to making direct arrangements with the Government in such cases. Nor does the existence of a project stock of spare parts and the promise of a mobile repair shop militate against the suggestion. To merge these on an agreed basis with an efficient organization within the UN family can only be to the general advantage and to that of this particular project.

17. Under movement control regulations in Burma, fifteen days notice is required to be given of all proposed journeys outside the area of Greater Rangoon. This should normally present no particular difficulty to specialists

who can foresee the rhythm of their work in advance, but I submit that managers of large-scale projects may well be called upon to travel at short notice to take cognizance of emergency situations that can arise without warning. I would hope that a case might be put to the Government of Burma to permit special exceptions to be made in such circumstances.

18. The list of local staff for the project shows four assistant agronomists on the strength - two for the upland pilot farm and two for the lowland farm. I should like to suggest, subject to the concurrence of the project manager, that while a figure of two counterparts to each of the two UN agronomists may be adequate in the research phase of the work of the pilot farms, there might be great advantage in increasing the number when the work moves out of the research phase into that of demonstration and extension.

19. The Government are aware of the project manager's request, supported by representations by the Resident Representative, that more spacious premises be provided. The Government's search for more adequate offices continues and it is greatly to be hoped that a suitable alternative will be found before more project officers and visiting staff of the sub-contractor's team have to be provided with office space. It would be a pity if the operational efficiency of the project were to be affected by sheer lack of desks.

20. I have already mentioned the need for demarcation between the duties of the Sittang Project and those of the UN expert working with the Electricity Supply Board with regard to suggested hydro-electric developments in the eastern half of the Sittang Valley.

Summary of Recommendations:-

- 1) Consideration of the establishment of a Land and Water Development Office in Burma to replace the present proliferation of specialists in this field of work (para. 6).
- 2) Consideration of the establishment of an action committee within the "Three Reservoirs" project (para. 8).
- 3) Demarcation of responsibilities in the eastern half of the Sittang Valley (para. 10).
- 4) Periodical checks for the specific purpose of confirming whether the main agreed outlines of plans of operations are being followed (para. 11).

- 5) Careful consideration of the problem what should be the proper duty station of the UN manager of a sub-contracted project and of the financial arrangements appropriate (para. 12).
- 6) Earlier reference to the Resident Representative in cases of suspected difficulties (para. 13).
- 7) The use of network analysis techniques and realistic imagination for the planning of technical co-operation projects (para. 14).
- 8) A pogrom in Supply Department (para. 15).
- 9) Use of the UNICEF vehicle maintenance service (para. 16).
- 10) An appeal to the Government of Burma for flexibility in movement control in urgent cases (para. 17).
- 11) Consideration in due course of the desirability of strengthening the staff of the two pilot farms of the Sittang Project on emergence from the research to the demonstration phase (para. 18).